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 Date 10 MAY 1991

Webster Leaves the CIA

The reduction of U.S.-Soviet tensions after policy changes in Moscow has strong implications for American strategic arms spending. But it never meant less need for the intelligence community in general or the Central Intelligence Agency in particular. In a confused and fast-changing world, the U.S. requires better intelligence information and analysis than ever. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait showed that. So does the power struggle between the Russian and Soviet governments.

William H. Webster, who is stepping down as director of central intelligence at the age of 67, took the job to rescue the CIA in 1987. His dying predecessor, William J. Casey, had discredited the agency with involvement in illegal schemes by the National Security Council to sell arms to the anti-American regime in Iran. Proceeds then were used to arm the contra rebels in Nicaragua — against the express orders of Congress.

The CIA, which had been discredited as recently as the early '70s with the use of CIA-connected personnel by the Republican National Committee to burglarize Democratic headquarters at the Watergate, needed a straight-shooter and -speaker, whom all parts of the American polity could trust. Judge Webster, having done just that for nine years at the FBI, served the CIA well.

He restored the faith of official Washington, if

not of the whole country, in the nation's intelligence apparatus. Gradually, people came to believe that, under his hand, the CIA would not do dirty tricks in American life or circumvent strictures placed on its behavior by Congress, and would know what was going on in the world.

History gave him another role, shrinking the CIA as budgets dictated, while altering its focus from a fixation on Soviet doings to a broader view of things as they are. Lately, other members of the Bush administration, including some with no previous experience of international affairs, have sniped at Judge Webster for the CIA's failure to have predicted the tumultuous changes of the past three years — especially in Iraq — with accuracy as to detail and timing. All who did better, step forward.

President Bush is a former director of central intelligence, from the post-Watergate era, who is entitled to his own choice at that job, subject to Senate confirmation. He wisely did not make a switch upon taking office. Now the president should heed the lessons of the 1970s and 1980s. The times and nation cry out for firm and constitutional control of the CIA, for improving essential intelligence collection and analysis, and for prudent restraint in operations. The next director of the CIA should not have to be followed by a clean-up act on the Webster model.